

For Your Information

November 26, 2012| By [Katrina Lantos Swett](#)

The following op-ed appeared in the [Boston Herald](#) on November 22, 2012.

Thanksgiving Day and the first feast of the Pilgrims remind us of their brave journey across the Atlantic in search of the freedom to honor their religious convictions according to their conscience.

Following that feast, others fleeing religious persecution made a similar journey. In Massachusetts, the Puritans came and then spread to neighboring Colonies. Pennsylvania was chartered by Quakers, Rhode Island by Baptists. Maryland was founded by Catholics. Presbyterians settled throughout the colonies. Jews arrived in the Dutch settlement of New Amsterdam, which the British later renamed New York. All had suffered on account of their beliefs. All had sought a new beginning. By the eve of the American Revolution, the 13 colonies were filled with people and their families who had forsaken past comforts for freedom.

These journeys continued throughout America's history. My parents came here after World War II as survivors of the Nazi extermination of six million human beings for their "crime" of being Jews. America today welcomes people of every faith and personal conviction to its shores and this generous tradition remains one of our proudest living legacies.

Today, America remains a beacon in a world where billions are still persecuted due to their faith. According to a Pew Research study released in August of this year, 75 percent of the world's people live in countries that perpetrate or tolerate serious religious freedom abuses. These nations range from China, the world's most populous nation, to Iran, where "warring against God" remains a capital crime, to Uzbekistan, whose Muslim majority faces continued repression reminiscent of some of the Soviet era's worst abuses. Religious freedom abuses include acts or threats of violence, prolonged periods of detention, various forms of torture, instances of disappearances, and even the crime of murder.

For their sake, Congress in 1998 passed, and the president signed into law, the International Religious Freedom Act. Among its provisions, IRFA established a religious freedom office in the State Department headed by an ambassador-at-large, and the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom on which I serve. The commission's job is to monitor religious freedom around the world and make recommendations to the president, the secretary of State, and Congress on how to respond. Each year, we issue a report that spotlights religious freedom abusers, including "countries of particular concern," the world's worst violators of religious freedom and related human rights.

Along with our continued stand for the persecuted abroad, our commission has stood for their dignified treatment once they arrive here in the U.S. In 2005, we released a study on ways our departments of Homeland Security and Justice could improve how our government treats such asylum seekers. This year, we urged Congress to reauthorize the Lautenberg Amendment, a lifeline for religious minorities who are escaping religious persecution in former Soviet nations

and Iran and seeking refuge in America.

As we gather with family, friends and loved ones to celebrate the quintessentially American holiday of Thanksgiving, let us be grateful for our freedoms, including the freedom to embrace the beliefs of our choosing. And let us continue to remember those abroad who are deprived of that fundamental human right and personal liberty.

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